

Fall 1973

on Albert Goldbarth and Thomas Johnson

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"I don't want it—"

"It's time for polemics."

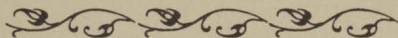
"—You wrecked my home."

"Precisely."

For Skelton, this brought back terrible memories of school. He looked about himself and thought, Why did this interlude seek me out?

The coalescence of *American Atlas* and *Ninety-Two In the Shade* is in the vision of a society where there is nothing to do. McGuane and Gerber have shredded the mythological conception of the artist's traditional and sacred omniscient view of destiny and pre-destiny. They are both bored with their lives, not life. They are bored knowing they were born sometime and knowing that they are going to die sometime. They are trying to find some enjoyment in between, and that lies in not knowing *what* the journey will entail. What they show us is the passage through mid-destiny; they learn that the only real thing that anyone inherits is death.

—Michael McCormick



UNDER COVER

by Albert Goldbarth

The Best Cellar Press, 1973

\$2.

FOOTHOLDS

by Thomas Johnson

Ironwood Press, 1973

\$1.50

Under Cover, a recent pamphlet by Albert Goldbarth, takes the reader into the field. Goldbarth, the archaeologist-scholar-poet draws upon various literary sources in many poems in this book, as well as in some of his other work. This use of established information, and the transformation it undergoes under the direction of shaman Goldbarth, leads the poems, which often contain source

material of equal weight, down entirely different roads. The author says in "To Linda, From The Writer's Workshop":

. . . Because it is all I have left,
I play with language.

In the case of these fifteen poems, this statement sometimes takes on a very literal meaning. The difference in the outcome and strength of these poems is huge. The successful poems mate with their history and become themselves at the cost of their sources. The first responsibility is to the poem, and, consequently, the weaker poems are the unselfish ones.

I don't think I have read a finer or more beautiful piece than "Things I've Put In This Poem." It sets up a rhythm of words and objects, like seeing the poem through pieces of time, laid carefully in a pattern on a blanket or the skin of some animal. The poem is divided into three sections. With "The top line is sea level . . ." we descend into the poem almost from present to past. We find a girl discovering a bullet where the heart should be as she unearths a skeleton on some archaeological dig. Deeper in the poem is the story of a farmer who has been shot with an arrow. As the doctor pulls it out, he bites into a bullet to relieve the pain. ". . . he feels the fever go into the sweat, and leave./ The pain goes into the bullet." In the last section Goldbarth outlines some things he has put into this poem and the rhythm of these elements becomes a prayer for the past, for history, and for the absence of pain in our lives. The strange chant at the end of the poem:

All our pain, go into the bullet.
All our pain, go into the bullet.
And bullet stay buried in the bottom line.

"Ritual Chant For Secret Names" and "Beast Song" are other examples of where this magic has chosen to live in the poem and imbue it with a spirit that is both surreal and uncomfortably real at the same time.

The less successful poems are even weaker because of the tremendous strength of the others. Goldbarth is indeed "playing with language" in "Excerpts From The Book Of Positions." This poem, in five sections, loses itself in its own material. Each section is titled with a sexual position, and they play off these in well-written puns and word surprises that ultimately fall in on themselves.

The poem "Coprolites (fossilized human feces)" is very much about what Goldbarth believes the poem to be. (This is the title of his forthcoming book from New Rivers Press.) I believe he explains something fundamental about his work in the last few lines of this poem:

... feces, fertile; to be broken
open and read and reveal
not what time, but what season;
"it is Spring." Amen, amen, amen.

When we break open these Coprolites of Goldbarth's, we are usually lucky, and we find those strange signs of past seasons that act as if they know us; we find the bullet that had lived in the heart for so many years. But some of the coprolites we open, and this is partially because the ones before were so beautiful, are disappointing. And we realize, with some reluctance, that they really are just fossilized human feces.

In Thomas Johnson's new pamphlet, *Footholds* (Ironwood Press), the tone is often very quiet, and the poems call for slow and careful reading. They are, for the most part, frozen moments, almost vignettes, that rise out of the flashback/dream vicinity. There is an edge of extra reality that Johnson installs in his work, rather like scenery that is a little too bright; that makes you wonder if it is really real. This is very important in making the good poems good. It doesn't seem to matter as much in the weaker poems.

Johnson talks about the concept of "footholds" in the title poem of the book:

There are footholds
Beyond the body's heavy shrugs,
A bare-knuckled
Way along the cliff edge,
Lit by the stony dream of falling forever . . .

In the best poems, Johnson gives the reader this feeling of sleep-walking, perhaps even with a certain confidence in what is happening, but with a fear of falling always in the back of the mind. Again, it is important to read this work carefully. There is a fragility in the structure, and something painfully tenuous about the pieces. The several shorter poems in the collection, from five to seven lines, are mostly unsuccessful. Johnson does not give himself enough room to do what he does well. Short poems are possibly the most difficult to write anyway, and his efforts here come off poorly, like much poetry written in English but indebted to English translations of Oriental poetry. Here is "Night In April With Crickets":

Cricket sound. Door swung open
On a dry hinge.
I would be reaching for
A high shelf.

Stacked white dishes.

This has some of the peculiar spirit that Johnson brings to his imagery, but I think the poem is too short for him to get his wind. There is a similar, longer poem that works a lot better. "Rightly It Would Be Morning" is similar in tone, which is, if anything, what I find interesting about the short poem. In "Rightly . . ." there is a real, or imagined presence, called "the other intelligence" in the poem, that is trying to get in:

Nothing cries "Out There"
Or needs to.
The rugged face we have expected is our own,

This seems to work because there is a completion we do not get from the shorter work, and the eighteen lines give Johnson time to work it out. He seems to favor this length and there are no poems in the book that run over a page.

If these shorter poems contain very few footholds, Johnson certainly finds his footing in others. "Sandiges" is a striking and weird poem, that comes rushing out of a dream atmosphere and drops like a dead bird at our feet. The poem is being written while we are reading it, with Johnson, the artist, painting in the scenery as he goes along. He says at one point, "Take a rainy road,/ Fill in a drunk gunning for home." Then he takes us to the edge of that cliff and nudges us:

In your sleep the next day has arrived.
It simmers on a back burner,
The black soup of an omen,

Your prize bull broadside in the road
Just over a blind rise
Dead zero
In the next pair of lights.

One thing Johnson depends on quite heavily is the pure sensuality of words. This is partly because he does write out of the dream, and this forces him to select richly textured words that carry a lot of implication. I mean this positively, where the word somehow gives a little jerk inside the head. Because of this sensuality, we sometimes get the poem completed somewhere before the actual end of the poem, which is odd, and then a last line or two that are simply there. In "The Legend Of Light," the last line is "The deep snow." It is offset from the two lines before it, and stands alone at the bottom of the poem. It certainly doesn't conclude anything, but it provides additional information that either works or doesn't work, for the reader. It would seem, from this collection, that Thomas Johnson doesn't sleep well. I think we are lucky for that.

—Quinton Duval